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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000004

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: REO REACHES OUT TO LOCAL BLACK COMMUNITY

REF: 08 BAGHDAD 003929

CLASSIFIED BY: Ramon Negrón, Director, Regional Embassy Office  
Basrah, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: As a follow-up to the REO's December meeting with ethnically African candidates running in the Provincial Council (PC) elections, the REO visited an ethnically African neighborhood in Az Zubayr on January 14. The visit was hosted by leaders of the Iraqi Freedom Movement (IFM), a political party established to defend the rights of Iraqis of African descent. IFM leaders praised the election of President Obama and spoke of a new era for blacks world-wide. At the same time, they called attention to their people's plight in Iraq, citing poor living conditions, high unemployment, and social inequality. Lacking funding and coordination among the black community (which is mixed Sunni-Shi'a), the party has been forced to consolidate its candidates into the Sunni-led National Dialogue Front as part of the Iraqi National Assembly Project coalition (149). They are unlikely to win representation on the council. End Summary.

#### First-Ever Visit to Az Zubayr

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¶2. (C) The majority of community members in the exceptionally poor neighborhood are from the black community, claiming descent from the Horn of Africa region. IFM leader Talal Jalal Diyaab Thajeer met REO visitors in the neighborhood's community center -- a simple room in a dilapidated house. Jalal was joined by several other locals, including First and Second Deputy Chairmen Salem Sha'ban Jum'a Salim and Haleem Faraj al-Obadi, and female IFM candidate Nedaa Abd Al-Hadi Abd Al-Sayyid Sa'ud.

¶3. (C) According to Jalal, there are about 1.5 million blacks in Iraq, between 250 and 300,000 of which live in Basra Province, with a history dating back a thousand years and tracing their origins to Africa. He praised the REO visit to his neighborhood, the first of any government official - foreign or domestic - as a symbol of future prosperity. Jalal praised the United States and joyfully referred to the recent election of Barack Obama as a turning point in his people's history.

#### Socio-Economic Conditions

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¶4. (C) Jalal described the various difficulties facing blacks in Iraq, with emphasis on the poor living conditions, unemployment, and lack of social equality. "Blacks are always at the bottom of the social scale," he lamented. While community members did not identify racial discrimination as the direct cause of their socioeconomic woes, they complained that they do not have the connections needed to access quality employment and education - in part because they are culturally and tribally distinct from their neighbors. Haleem Faraj added that while the Basra suburb of Az Zubayr was 70 percent black, there were no blacks in the police force or district council. He also pointed out that local one-room dwellings averaged 15

residents each. Faraj asserted that jobs could only be obtained through bribes and that the community needed economic projects to overcome the unemployment crisis.

#### Provincial Elections

15. (C) Regarding provincial elections, Faraj explained that his people are too poor to compete politically, complaining that his party has not been able to campaign because it lacks money. Recognizing these limitations, IFM agreed to fold its candidates into the National Dialogue Front list. NDF placed the top IFM candidate, Jalil, third on its list, giving the community at least some hope of representation. Blacks did not seem especially optimistic about their chances, however. Most local observers believe it is unlikely that NDF will win more than one or two seats on the PC.

16. (C) Faraj noted that his people were scattered throughout the province, making it difficult to mobilize them. The party's female candidate, Nedaa, explained that she campaigns via cell phone contact and personal visits to known black families in the city. She regretted that she could not expand her campaign beyond that because of lack of funds and fear that, as a woman, it would be difficult for her to be accepted campaigning outside her immediate community. Faraj stressed a need for minority status recognition for blacks in Iraq and surmised that a reserved seat on the PC, similar to the Christian seat, could be a solution.

#### Comment

17. (C) A walking tour of the neighborhood revealed appalling

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living conditions with a noticeable lack of basic services, including clean water and adequate sewer systems. These conditions are not atypical in Basra, however. Likewise, with a 60 percent jobless rate in the province, complaints of unemployment are not unique to minority groups, although it appears that the black community suffers disproportionately under the government's patronage-based political system.

18. (C) Comment continued: If Faraj's estimates are correct, a united black community would easily have enough votes to win at least one seat on the PC. Noting that one IFM leader was Sunni and the other Shi'a, the IFM's apparent lack of large-scale popular support could also be due, in addition to race, to other factors. Many ethnic Africans in Basra could either be too spread out and unable to organize effectively, or be swayed more by varying political or religious views rather than by race. While we are not convinced that it is as large as their leaders claim, there is definitely a sizeable black community in Basra - we believe it to be much larger than the Christian minority in Basra, which enjoys one guaranteed seat on the PC. End comment.  
NEGRON